



Mae Murray

Also Known As:

Marie Adrienne Koenig, "The Girl with the Bee-Stung Lips," "The Gardenia of the Screen," Mrs. Robert Z. Leonard, Mrs. David Mdivani

Lived:

May 10, 1889 - March 23, 1965

Worked as:

chorus girl, film actress, producer, scenario writer, theatre actress

Worked In:

United States

by Artemis Willis

Actress Mae Murray's famous epithet, "The Girl with the Bee-Stung Lips" describes far more than her cupid-bowed mouth; it evokes something unusual, distracting, and for some of her fans perhaps even overwhelming. Also known as "The Gardenia of the Screen," Murray's presence can be considered excessive and baroque, pleasurably perfuming and intensifying audience experience beyond whatever movie happens to encircle her. Critics of Murray's abilities consider her actions (vamping villains at midnight) silly and her presentation (bee-stung lips on an 1840s girl from Utah) incongruous (Slide 2002, 259). But a force of nature is not necessarily natural, and Murray's fans reveled in her colorful performances.

Indeed, an acting style as gestural as Murray's is anything but naturalized, as in merging with an ensemble or submitting to a role; it is a hallmark of the nineteenth century melodramatic repertoire. Further, Murray's signature dance narratives actually conjoin stage stardom of the late 1800s with the foundations of movie stardom in the early 1900s by existing without as well as within the text. Apart from personal taste—predilections for exaggeration or realism—French Surrealist writer Jacques Rigaut was simply intoxicated by something alogically sublime: "Her little laugh you'll never control, her latest lies, her next lies, her gowns, her exasperating childishness, her ultimata about a glove or stroll, things you're unaware of...or an extravagant reward, of vice, I'm in love with Mae Murray (Rigaut 2000, 205)."

Born in Portsmouth, Virginia, Murray (née Marie Adrienne Koenig) learned to dance in Chicago, where she was employed by a number of nightclubs as a chorus girl. In pursuit of the dream of stage stardom, she moved to New York, changed her name to Mae Murray, and immediately

found work as a dancer. Her Broadway debut in 1906 was the result of an emergency substitution for Irene Castle, co-star of Vernon Castle, in Irving Berlin's first musical, "About Town." Joining the chorus line of the Ziegfeld Follies in 1908, by 1915 Murray had become a headliner. Shortly thereafter, Adolph Zukor signed her to a screen contract with Paramount.

Released in 1916, Murray first film, *To Have And To Hold* secured her status as a movie star ("Mae Murray Makes A Good Movie Star"), generating a string of box office hits, including the De Mille-directed *The Dream Girl* (1916) and *A Mormon Maid* (1917), in which she played alongside then-actor Frank Borzage. Her second husband Robert Z. Leonard, with whom she joined Universal to open her own production unit, Bluebird, directed most of Murray's films in the 1910s. In films such as *Her Body in Bond* (1918), Leonard created a dance prologue in which she performed as Pierrette, replacing the expository approach of intertitles with pantomime. Perhaps because many of her films contained dance sequences designed for her, such as *The Delicious Little Devil* (1919) with her former onstage dance partner Rudolph Valentino, Murray was one of the first actresses to demand live mood music on her sets (as well as the ubiquitous soft focus required of so many actresses).

In 1922 Murray and Leonard signed with Louis B. Mayer to make films for MGM under the Tiffany label, producing eight elaborate showcases for Murray's extravagant and florid performance style. After *Circe the Enchantress* (1924) Murray and Leonard parted. [See Mae Murray, Interview, December, 1959, Columbia University Oral History Project, 1227-1228, where she says she named the company after her Tiffany ring, about which "I had my own way," but complains about being called "hard to handle" in her account of the move from her company to Metro Goldwyn Mayer. EDs.]

The unquestionable apex of Murray's cinematic *oeuvres* was the 1925 von Stroheim masterpiece, *The Merry Widow*, in which she famously waltzed with leading man John Gilbert. Critical and popular reception for the film was superlative. In addition to praising artistic choices, such as the colors in the wedding sequence at the film's end, the *New York Times* identified a new dimension to Murray's range in this "fantastic affair:"

Mr. von Stroheim also is to be credited with having elicited from Mae Murray the best acting she has done in the last few years...Here she is not the spinning top she was in other features directed by Robert Z. Leonard, but almost a restrained actress, who gives a splendid account of herself in every situation. She illustrates her grief and her joy, her contempt and her admiration in telling style ("Mae Murray Charming in The Merry Widow").

Murray made three more films for MGM before marrying her fourth husband, David Mdivani, a specious 'Prince' who coerced her into remaining in Europe, effectively nullifying her contract with the studio. After another divorce, which ended in a bitter custody battle in which she eventually lost her son, Koran Mdivani, Murray's career began to deteriorate. She acted in a few low-budget talkies in the early 1930s, and in 1934 returned to Broadway briefly to perform in *The*

Milky Way. In the 1940s she made regular appearances in the Times Square establishment, Billy Rose's Diamond Horseshoe, where her act included dancing the Merry Widow Waltz.

Apart from collaborating with Jane Ardmore on her aptly entitled biography, *The Self-Enchanted* (1959), Murray's final decades were spent in eccentric reverie and abject poverty [See 3 pages from her unpublished memoir "[Life Stories](#)." EDs.]. Wandering from coast-to-coast, she was occasionally discovered absently humming the Merry Widow Waltz on a Central Park bench. Like Blanch Dubois and Norma Desmond (a character considered to be inspired in part by Murray) her lyrically lavish imagination, which for the French Surrealists once evoked something of the uncontrolled, had suffused her own perception. As she introduced herself to a doctor at her final residence, the Motion Picture House and Hospital, "I'm Mae Murray, the young Ziegfeld beauty with the bee-stung lips – and Hollywood is calling me (Marion 1972, 297)."

Bibliography

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Balshofer, Fred J. and Arthur C. Miller. *One Reel a Week*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967: 143-154.

Bangley, Jimmie. "Mae Murray: 'The Girl With The Bee Stung Lips.'" *Classic Images* no. 254 (August 1996): 14-25.

Bennett, Alice. "Mae Murray Makes-Believe." *Motion Picture Classic* (February 1919): 25-26.

Bodeen, DeWitt. "Mae Murray." *Films in Review* (December 1975): 597-618.

Briscoe, Johnson. "A Child of Fortune." *Motion Picture* (March 1917): 29-31.

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"Mae Murray Charming in 'The Merry Widow.'" *New York Times* (30 August 1925): n.p.

“Mae Murray—the Star Who Danced to Fame.” *Theater* (June 1919): 395.

“Mae Murray Makes a Good Movie Star: Former Dancer an Attractive Heroine in ‘To Have and to Hold’ at the Strand.” *New York Times* (6 March 1916): n.p.

Marion, Frances. *Off With Their Heads!* New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972.

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Rigaut, Jacques. “Mae Murray.” In *The Shadow & Its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on the Cinema*. Ed., Paul Hammond. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2000: 205.

Slide, Anthony. *Silent Players: A Biographical and Autobiographical Study of 100 Silent Film Actors and Actresses*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2002: 258-260.

St. Johns, Adela Rogers. “Mae Murray—A Study in Contradictions.” *Photoplay* (July 1924): 43, 124.

Archival Paper Collections:

Reminiscences of Mae Murray: oral history, 1959. [Columbia University, Rare Book and Manuscript Library](#).

Filmography

A. Archival Filmography: Extant Film Titles:

1. Mae Murray as Actress

A Mormon Maid. Dir.: Robert Z. Leonard, sc.: Charles Sarver and Paul West (Jesse L. Lasky Feature Play Co., Inc. US 1917) cas.: Mae Murray, Richard Beery Cummings, si, b&w, 35mm., 5 reels. Archive: [Library of Congress \[USW\]](#), [UCLA Film and Television Archive \[USL\]](#), [Academy Film Archive \[USF\]](#).

Princess Virtue. Dir.: Robert Z. Leonard, sc.: Fred Myton (Bluebird Photoplays, Inc. US 1918) cas.: Mae Murray, Wheeler Nicholson Oakman, Paul Lederer, si., b&w, 35mm., 5 reels. Archive: [Library of Congress \[USW\]](#).

Face Value. Dir. Robert Z. Leonard, sc.: Fred Myton, Mae Murray (story) (Bluebird Photoplays, Inc., US 1918) cas.: Mae Murray, Clarissa Selwyn, si., b&w, 35mm., 5 reels. Archive: [George Eastman Museum \[USR\]](#).

The Bride’s Awakening. Dir: Robert Z. Leonard, sc.: F. McGrew Willis (Bluebird Photoplays, Inc., US 1918) cas.: Mae Murray, Lew Cody, si., b&w, 35mm., 5-7 reels. Archive: [EYE Filmmuseum \[NLA\]](#).

The Twin Pawns. Prod./dir./sc.: Léonce Perret (Acme Pictures Corp. US 1919) cas.: Mae Murray, Warner Oland, si., b&w, 35mm., 5 reels. Archive: [BFI National Archive \[GBB\]](#), [EYE Filmmuseum \[NLA\]](#).

The Delicious Little Devil. Dir.: Robert Z. Leonard, sc.: John B. Clymer and Harvey F. Thew (Universal Film Mfg. Co., Inc. US 1919) cas.: Mae Murray, Rudolph Valentino, si., b&w, 35mm., 6 reels; 5,650 ft. Archive: [EYE Filmmuseum \[NLA\]](#).

The A.B.C. of Love. Dir./sc.: Léonce Perret (Acme Pictures Corp. US 1919) cas.: Mae Murray, Holmes Herbert, si., b&w. 35mm., 6 reels. Archive: [EYE Filmmuseum \[NLA\]](#).

The Right to Love. Dir.: George Fitzmaurice, sc.: Ouida Bergère (Famous Players- Lasky Corp. US 1920) cas.: Mae Murray, Herbert Holmes, si., b&w, 35mm., 7 reels; 6,661 ft. Archive: [EYE Filmmuseum \[NLA\]](#).

Idols of Clay. Dir.: George Fitzmaurice, sc.: Ouida Bergère (Famous Players- Lasky Corp. US 1920) cas.: Mae Murray, David Cumming, si., b&w, 35mm., 7 reels; 7,230 ft. Archive: [Gosfilmofond of Russia \[RUR\]](#).

Broadway Rose. Dir.: Robert Z. Leonard, sc.: Edmund Goulding (Tiffany Productions, Inc. US 1922) cas.: Mae Murray, Monte Blue, si., b&w, 35mm., 6 reels; 5,500 ft. Archive: [Gosfilmofond of Russia \[RUR\]](#).

Jazzmania. Dir.: Robert Z. Leonard, sc.: Edmund Goulding (Tiffany Productions, Inc. US 1923) cas.: Mae Murray, Rod La Rocque, si., b&w, 35mm., 8 reels; 8,765 ft. Archive: [George Eastman Museum \[USR\]](#).

The French Doll. Dir.: Robert Z. Leonard, sc.: Frances Marion (Tiffany Productions, Inc. US 1923) cas.: Mae Murray, Orville Caldwell, si., b&w, 35mm., 7 reels; 7,028 ft. Archive: [Gosfilmofond of Russia \[RUR\]](#), [Jugoslovenska Kinoteka \[YUB\]](#).

Mademoiselle Midnight. Dir.: Robert Z. Leonard, sc.: Carl Harbaugh, John Russell (Tiffany Productions, Inc. US 1924) cas.: Mae Murray, John St. Polis, si., b&w, 35mm., 7 reels; 6,778 ft. Archive: [Jugoslovenska Kinoteka \[YUB\]](#), [UCLA Film and Television Archive \[USL\]](#).

The Merry Widow. Prod./dir./sc.: Erich von Stroheim (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Corp. US 1925) cas.: Mae Murray, John Gilbert, si., b&w, 35mm., 10 reels; 10,027ft. Archive: [Cinémathèque Royale de Belgique \[BEB\]](#), [Münchner Stadtmuseum \[DEI\]](#), [George Eastman Museum \[USR\]](#), [Gosfilmofond of Russia \[RUR\]](#), [Cineteca Nazionale \[ITN\]](#), [Cinemateca Romana \[ROB\]](#), [Filmoteca Española \[ESM\]](#), [Deutsches Filminstitut \[DEW\]](#), [BFI National Archive \[GBB\]](#), [Danske Filminstitut \[DKK\]](#), [Museo Nazionale del Cinema \[ITT\]](#), [National Film and Sound Archive of Australia \[AUC\]](#), [Jugoslovenska Kinoteka \[YUB\]](#), [UCLA Film and Television Archive \[USL\]](#), [Library of Congress \[USW\]](#), [Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée \[FRB\]](#), [EYE Filmmuseum \[NLA\]](#).

Peacock Alley. Dir.: Marcel De Sano, sc.: Wells Root (Tiffany Productions, Inc. US 1930) cas.: Mae Murray, George Barraud, sd, col and b&w, 35mm., 7 reels; 6,060 ft. Archive: [Cinémathèque Suisse \[CHL\]](#), [Library of Congress \[USW\]](#), [BFI National Archive \[GBB\]](#).

Bachelor Apartment. Dir.: Lowell Sherman, sc.: J. Walter Ruben (RKO Productions US 1931) cas.: Mae Murray, Irene Dunne, sd, b&w 35mm, 8 reels; 6,880 ft. Archive: [BFI National Archive \[GBB\]](#).

2. Mae Murray as Writer

Face Value. Dir. Robert Z. Leonard, sc.: Fred Myton, Mae Murray (story) (Bluebird Photoplays, Inc., US 1918) cas.: Mae Murray, Clarissa Selwyn, si., b&w, 35mm., 5 reels. Archive: [George Eastman Museum \[USR\]](#).

B. Filmography: Non-Extant Film Titles:

1. Mae Murray as Actress

To Have and To Hold, 1916; *Sweet Kitty Bellairs*, 1916; *Honor Thy Name*, 1916; *The Dream Girl*, 1916; *The Big Sister*, 1916; *The Plow Girl*, 1916; *On Record*, 1917; *The Primrose Ring*, 1917; *At First Sight*, 1917; *Her Body in Bond*, 1918; *Modern Love*, 1918; *The Taming of Kaiser Bull*, 1918; *Danger, Go Slow*, 1918; *The Scarlet Shadow*, 1919; *What Am I Bid?*, 1919; *Big Little Person*, 1919; *On with the Dance*, 1920; *The Gilded Lily*, 1921; *Peacock Alley*, 1922; *Fascination*, 1922; *Fashion Row*, 1923; *Circe, the Enchantress*, 1924; *The Masked Bride*, 1925; *Valencia*, 1926; *Altars of Desire*, 1927; *High Stakes*, 1931.

2. Mae Murray as Writer

Danger, Go Slow, 1918; *Modern Love*, (story) 1918.

C. DVD Sources:

Beyond the Rocks. DVD. (Milestone US 2006) - contains *The Delicious Little Devil* (1919)

D. Streamed Media:

The Delicious Little Devil (1919) (with Dutch intertitles)

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<<https://wfpp-test.cul.columbia.edu/pioneer/mae-murray/>>

